

Preserving History Is A Moving Experience

By JANE LANE

Along St. George Street these days is a spectacle of great interest to some curious neighbors. To others whose passion leads them to fight for the preservation of Duxbury's past, the delicate maneuvering of the former Delano summer home is greatly appreciated.

For Jeanne Clark, president of the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society, the mammoth effort to move the 200 year-old Cape style home is both interesting and appreciated. As an advisory group to the town on such matters, the DR&HS is grateful the young owners of this home, Brian and Amy Cook, have taken the time to research, preserve and improve this fragile property. "If only more people were as sensitive to this town's history," she lamented.

Too many times, Clark said, temporary caretakers of Duxbury's most treasured antique homes have not taken the time to research and appreciate the historical background of the town's first homesteads. Often times, she said, that research gives us new and colorful insights into the first families who settled in Duxbury. It is a part of this town's past that its current occupants must not allow to vanish.

In support of her argument Clark cited a recent case on Standish St. at the corner of Hornbeam Rd. where the owners opted to demolish rather than improve a structure built when Hornbeam was just a cart path leading to the bay. In just one day, the house which was built in the mid-1800s by the Freeman family and in which Edna Marie Heeks was born and lived, was crushed into splinters. Its granite foundation was loaded into dumpsters and hauled away. That, according to Clark, was "a tragedy for the entire town."

Since that historical calamity, the DR&HS has applied pressure for the town to adopt some type of ordinance which would delay immediate destruction of homes built more than 50 years ago. The law, if adopted by town meeting, would not prohibit such destruction but would require homeowners to sit and wait about 6 months after they file for a demolition permit. The ordinance, Clark explained, "would only buy us time" in which townspeople would be alerted to the plans. While the homeowners cool their heels, motivated residents could form some sort of grassroots movement to save the home from extinction.

This is not to say everything erected more than 50 years ago is worth preserving, she admitted. There are some homes which would elicit no such preservation effort on the part of local historians. For their part, the DR&HS would say with fondness, good riddance. But that is rarely the case.

"This town is in fragile condition," Clark said. "There is a real estate boom going on and people for whom money is no object simply want to buy beautiful locations. They have no real interest or need for the old home on that property. Their only intent may be to take the house down and some of Duxbury's history along with it. Someday, this sort of thing will happen in the Village if we don't get some ordinance in place soon."

A proposal to create a historic district in Duxbury was defeated by about 18 votes some 7 years ago. That proposal would have placed stringent controls regarding the color and design of the facades of homes and commercial buildings within the district. Many towns, such as Cohasset and Hingham, enacted such districts years ago.

Just recently, members of the historical society sponsored a Sarah Wingate Taylor lecture which featured a distinguished panel of historians, preservationists and historical architects who discussed the benefits of adopting a demolition delay ordinance. Such bylaws, they argued, are part of an effort to preserve the architectural heritage of Massachusetts cities and towns. More than 30 communities in the state have enacted such ordinances which will delay demolition of homes outside a designated historical district. Or, in Duxbury's case, on an individual basis whenever a home older than 50-75 years is slated for destruction.

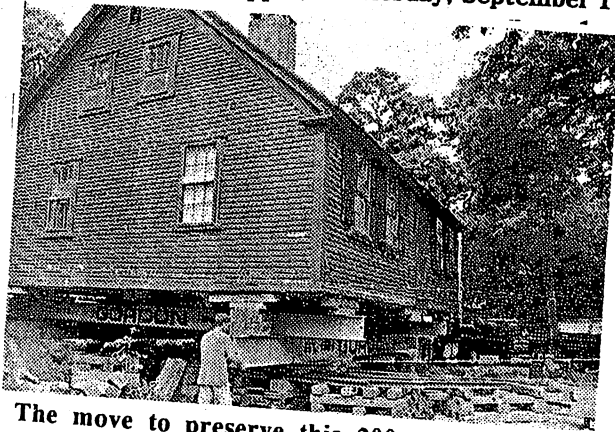
In Brookline, for example, after a developer applied for a demolition permit, the town was able to preserve the Coolidge Corner Theatre. However, in Arlington the St. James Rectory, listed as an historically significant building, was demolished when the contractor used the wrong address when applying for a demolition permit.

Other communities which have enacted demolition delay ordinances include Barnstable, Canton, Hingham and Yarmouth.

The town's historical society is in favor of implementing a demolition delay ordinance, according to executive director Marcia Solberg. The group plans to take a more active role in educating residents about such a proposal in the hope that an ordinance will be approved by town meeting.

Although the owners of the home on St. George St., which passed from Amherst Alden to Edward Winslow in 1797 never contemplated demolition, such an ordinance would prevent others from seriously considering that option. Enforcement of a 6-month waiting period before demolition would deter most owners from going forward on those plans. As the saying goes, time is money. The Duxbury Rural and Historical Society is banking on that.

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The move to preserve this 200-year old home on St. George Street continues.

Photo by Deni Johnson